



## **Sent – Part 11**

### **The Priority of the Gospel**

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Last week in the book of Acts, we saw Barnabas and Saul appointed by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel and sent by the church to the island of Cyprus. The two encountered a false prophet and sorcerer named Bar-Jesus who sought to oppose them. Recognizing persecution and opposition waits on the other side, only by knowing what we are willing to die for will we find what we are willing to live for.

This week, Part 11 of Sent, we will read Acts 16. Paul continues his missionary journey across the Mediterranean area, and upon entering the city of Lystra he meets Timothy who joins him. Paul and his companions consider traveling to the Roman province of Asia as well the Roman province of Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prevents them from doing so. Instead, Paul receives a vision from God directing him towards Macedonia. Entering the Macedonian city of Philippi, Paul and Silas are arrested for casting out a spirit but are later freed from prison and the jailer receives salvation. The story demonstrates the priority of the Gospel: it both requires our commitment and demands a response.

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## **BELONG**

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Any life updates?
  - What is something the group can be praying about?
  - What is something the group can praise this week?
  
  - What is something in your life that you are strongly committed to? Why do you have such commitment?
  - Has something ever been presented to you in such a way that you had no choice but to respond to it in some way?
  - Where do you find you have been able to participate strongly in community? What makes a successful community?
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## **BELIEVE**

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

### **The Gospel Requires Commitment**

Acts 16 begins with Paul entering the city of Lystra, a city in what is present-day Turkey. Lystra was visited several times by Paul during his missionary journeys across the Mediterranean, but it is this particular visit to the city where he meets a disciple of Jesus named Timothy. You may recognize Timothy's name from the New Testament books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy. These were actually letters written by Paul to Timothy while the young man served in the city of Ephesus, evidence of their strong relationship which began with their meeting here in Acts 16.

In order for Timothy to join Paul on his journey, the text says he had to be circumcised because of the Jews who lived in the area. Timothy's mother was a believer in Christ but also Jewish, meaning from childhood he had been brought up as a Jew. It appears his father, being a Greek, prevented him from being circumcised. Circumcision, as had been determined at the Council of Jerusalem in the prior chapter, was not a requirement for salvation, evidenced by Timothy already being described as a true believer prior to circumcision. However, Paul did not want Timothy's circumcision to be a stumbling block for the Jews' belief in Christ, and because Timothy already was a Jew, it was not a difficulty for him to do so.

Leaving Lystra, Paul and his companions delivered the news of the decision of the Jerusalem council from town to town. We would assume this meant they were informing believers that following Jewish custom was not a requirement to follow Christ. In response, the text says the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew in number. Without unnecessary requirements being demanded of Christians by certain Jewish believers, it makes sense that the Gospel could more effectively and powerfully spread. Paul's attention now turned to the region of Phrygia and Galatia (other towns in what is modern day Turkey) as they were forbidden from preaching the Gospel in the province of Asia. The same difficulty was met when they attempted to travel to Bithynia. It is not explained why the Holy Spirit prevented them from speaking to these regions, but it demonstrates that even when Christians pursue the right things, such as the preaching of the Gospel to the lost, God will intentionally close doors to places we are not meant to travel, literally and otherwise.

Even in uncertainty, where what we think is the right next step is rejected by God, we must be committed to God's mission for our lives, not our own ideas about the best path forward. However, God does eventually make things clear. Paul receives a vision from God concerning a man from Macedonia, who says to him in the dream to come and



help his people. In response to the vision, Paul immediately leaves for Macedonia, concluding that God wanted him and his companions to preach the Gospel there. They eventually reach Philippi, a major Greek city in Macedonia, where they meet a woman named Lydia who is another disciple of Jesus. Her house becomes their place of lodging during their stay in the city.

It is at this point that Paul and Silas encounter a female servant who is possessed by a spirit that allows her to predict the future. The text says her foresight was being used by others to make money, so upon Paul's exorcizing of the demon from her body, the people are quite upset. Brought before the authorities of the city, the people falsely claim that Paul and Silas were advocating for them to practice Jewish customs that went against Roman law. Overwhelmed by the accusations of the crowd, the magistrates order for Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten with rods. After the public flogging, Paul and Silas are thrown into prison.

Commitment to Christ's mission does not guarantee convenient circumstances. In fact, Jesus ensures us that persecution will come if we truly speak the name of the Christ out in the world. For the early disciples, the reality of physical torture, imprisonment, and execution was common within the Roman Empire. The church here in the United States does not face such circumstances, but as world history demonstrates, things can always change, and unfortunately it can happen much quicker than one thinks. Although we rightly should have no fear of such persecution today, we should always be prepared to face opposition of any kind. If we are real disciples, and if we want to see the Gospel spread like wildfire, we must prioritize commitment over convenience and comfort.

### **The Gospel Demands Response**

Paul and Silas' beating and imprisonment was the result of their boldness in freeing a possessed woman from a demon. The actions of real Christians performing the work of God will always be noticed by the world and demand a response from those who witness it. The Gospel itself presses against the brokenness of the world in such a way that it forces people to deal with it and come to terms. For some, the response is to repent of their sin and turn to Christ's saving work on the Cross. For others, it means a rejection of the truth and removal of its preachers. Paul and Silas unfortunately face the latter response as thousands of Christians around the world still do today.

The Apostles' aim was always to generate a response despite a negative outcome in this situation. In a world that declares you can't press your beliefs on anyone, Christians need to understand that we do so that a lost and dying world can receive salvation and ever-lasting life. We want to see people ask the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Ironically, in the last place Paul and Silas would want to be, it is in prison where they receive this question. The Apostles were not shaken by their imprisonment but rather sang to God and worshiped despite being wrapped in chains. The text says an earthquake suddenly overtook the prison, the doors flew open, and their chains were



loosened. The jailer, realizing the prisoners would now escape under his watch, knew that he was as good as dead to the Romans. Before he can kill himself, Paul intervenes, yelling at the jailer not to harm himself.

Falling to his knees before them, the jailer asks, “What must I do to be saved?” This is how the Gospel goes forward; through people who push the outside world to respond, and by God’s grace bringing people to a place of response. God works all things toward his purposes, and so despite the opposition we face we can have confidence that in our obedience, somehow and someday, the world will see Jesus. All we have to do is deliver the message and allow others to respond accordingly. As we see here, God guides events in such a way as to make no response impossible. The supernatural rescue of Paul and Silas leaves no room for the jailer to continue life as he had before. Luckily, he makes the right choice and believes in Christ, leading to the salvation of all in his household.

### **The Gospel Creates Community**

The Gospel work in a person does not stop when they are ushered from death to life. After salvation, Christians are ushered into a new community marked by radical care and a Christ-made connection. We already saw this earlier with Lydia inviting Paul and Silas to stay with her while in Philippi. The church community, when it is unified and works together towards its common calling of the Gospel, strengthens and empowers Christians to fulfill their mission together.

Immediately after the jailer receives salvation and is baptized, he invites Paul and Silas to his house to eat a meal with them. The bond we share in Christ creates instant connection, even with new believers. Paul and Silas eventually return to Lydia who remains with an open invitation to her home. The text says other Christians gathered at the house to encourage Paul and Silas after their run-in with the Roman authorities.

At each turn in the story, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are there to support the Apostles in their mission to preach the Gospel. The same is true of us today.

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## BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- If you are being honest, what kind of commitment would you say you have to the Gospel?
  - What lines are you not willing to cross for the sake of the Gospel? How far is too far when it comes to your calling?
- Do you find that people respond to the Gospel when it is presented to them?
  - In your experience, do people respond positively or negatively to the Gospel? Why?
- Have you felt that the common call of the Gospel has created meaningful community in your life?
  - How can you better serve other Christians to help the mission, but also form meaningful bonds?
  - What ways can the church be better at building community amongst Christians?